

4

SEEING MIKAGURA SCHOOL SUITE
A SIXTEEN-DAY-OLD MOON

Last Note.

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ミカグラ学園組曲

十六夜シーイング



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三カブ学園組曲

十六夜シーイング

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SEEING A SIXTEEN-DAY-OLD MOON



MIKAGURA SCHOOL SUITE

****Chapter One: Blue****

“I can’t believe it... Asuhi-kun...”

My muttered words are easily drowned out by the roaring cheers of the crowd filling the coliseum.

The scene unfolding before me is hard to accept.

Having defeated Asuhi-kun, the Rookie Battle champion, Otone Fujishiro, looks down at his collapsed form with a bored expression, then strides off as if she feels nothing at all.

It’s like she’s saying she has no more business on this stage.

Asuhi-kun, still sprawled on the ground, can only watch her retreating figure, biting his lip.

“Being unaffiliated at this point probably means she’s in a similar situation as Eruna, ryui. There’s no info on her, but maybe she joined a club briefly and quit right away...” Bimi says.

“So, she’s competing in the Rookie Battle without a club?” I ask.

It depends on the club’s policies and individual approaches, but most first-years aim to climb the tournament with help from their club’s seniors or peers.

I wouldn’t have made it to the top eight without the drama club’s support.

Yet, Otone-chan won the championship all on her own, so effortlessly...

“She’s amazing... but why does she seem kind of lonely?” I murmur.

Her expression seems to reject everyone’s congratulations.

Despite basking in such massive cheers, she looks more isolated than anyone.

Asuhi-kun finally manages to stand, bowing politely to the crowd over and over.

“He’s probably shocked, but... Asuhi-kun’s such a great kid, ryui! I wish I had a kid like him, ryui,” Bimi says.

“Wait, Bimi, you’re... gonna have a human kid!? What if they end up looking like you and it’s kinda meh!? Can you handle that responsibility!?” I exclaim.

“That’s so offensive I could win a lawsuit, ryui...” Bimi grumbles.

While we’re bantering, Otone Fujishiro is already heading out of the coliseum.

But just as she pushes the door to leave, it bursts open with a loud *BAM!!

* A guy—Shigure—storms in from the opposite side.

He spins Otone-chan 180 degrees, supporting her bewildered back, and pushes her back to the center of the coliseum.

The crowd erupts in excited squeals.

“Kyaa! It’s ‘Hero Time’ Ninomiya-senpai!! Look, look! He’s not wearing glasses today!? So rare! Contacts, maybe?” one girl squeals.

“I was totally into Shigure-senpai with glasses... I mean, that’s all I’ve ever seen. But this...!” another says.

“It’s totally hot, right!?” they chorus, hugging each other in a trance.

I scoff, “Hmph!” at the two first-year girls.

Shigure’s scared of contacts, so he’s probably bare-eyed right now.

He’s so pathetic he can’t even put in eye drops himself.

Once, he asked me to help with eye drops. I said, “Here we go—blink, blink!” but instead of blinking, he mumbled, “Blink... blink...!!” with his eyes squeezed shut. No way the drops were getting in.

I had to pry his eyes open and douse him with drops while he screamed...

Even seeing Shigure scared of eye drops, these girls would probably swoon, saying, "That side of Shigure-senpai is so cute...!" It makes me feel weirdly conflicted.

In that brief moment, a podium has been set up in the coliseum's center. Otone-chan, the champion, stands on it, looking sulky.

"She's radiating 'I wanna leave' vibes without saying a word..." I note.

"Like Eruna during class when she's starving and hitting her limit, ryui," Bimi says.

"Do you have to use *me* as an example!? Lock that away! Bury it deep with a heavy padlock!" I protest.

Just thinking about it makes my stomach growl.

I grab Bimi's head and shake it in protest.

That moment when I crossed a line as a girl is a cursed incident I need to bury forever.

"Plus, Himi-chan told me I wasn't just sulking quietly! I was striking a pose like I was about to eat the kid next to me! They said I wasn't looking at my classmate but at a meal to satisfy my hunger!" I add.

"You're right! That might not have been the best example, ryui..." Bimi admits, dizzy from my shaking but showing remorse.

That makes me... not hungry, but annoyed.

Meanwhile, Shigure's about to start a hero interview with Otone-chan.

She covers her ears against the endless cheers, clearly finding them annoying.

"Eruna does the exact same thing when the cafeteria lady says she's short on points, ryui," Bimi remarks.

"Can you stop digging up my past for comparisons!? Can I please forget the time I had to eat free bread crusts because I couldn't afford anything

else!?” I snap.

For someone who loves eating, that’s a trauma I don’t want to relive.

Maybe Bimi’s getting revenge for my earlier jab. I glare at him, and he tries to whistle innocently—badly.

The crowd doesn’t thin out at all.

An atmosphere of anticipation builds as everyone watches the hero interview.

“Normally, people leave right after the match, ryui... but this year’s special, ryui,” Bimi says.

“She made that big an impact, huh?” I reply.

As the venue quiets, people focus on her every move.

Maybe her unshaken demeanor and refusal to acknowledge the cheers pique their curiosity.

Someone swallows hard, waiting for the new heroine who defeated the top favorite to speak.

Shigure breaks the tension with his carefree tone.

“And now, the Rookie Battle tournament champion, Otone Fujishiro! Amazingly, she’s unaffiliated, not part of any club!” he announces.

His bright, practiced hosting makes you forget he’s the manga research club’s rep and not a professional MC.

“But, ryui...” Bimi starts.

“Yeah... I hate to admit it, but as his cousin, it’s hard to face this reality... I wanna run up and roast him!” I say, covering my face.

Otone-chan stands there, looking puzzled, which is understandable.

Because, because...!

“Shigure, you’re pointing the mic at the wrong person! That’s Minatogawa-senpai in the front row! She’s way far from Otone-chan—how do you mess that up!?” I cry.

“He can’t see a thing without his glasses, ryui...” Bimi suggests.

Right.

Shigure’s vision is so bad he can’t recognize people without glasses.

I once saw him mistake my mom for me and whisper a love message to her.

I pretended not to see, but Mom looking kinda pleased was a shock...

“So, let’s get to the hero interview!!” Shigure continues.

Thinking the crowd’s buzz is just interview anticipation, he keeps talking to Minatogawa-senpai, oblivious.

“Why doesn’t Minatogawa-senpai tell him he’s got the wrong person!? And why does she look kinda happy!?” I exclaim.

“Minatogawa-kun’s cheeks seem a bit flushed, ryui...” Bimi notes.

She straightens up, basking in the attention.

What is this? What do we do? Who’s gonna stop this...?

“First off, tell us your honest feelings right now!!” Shigure prompts.

Honest feelings? She’s just a spectator.

She should be stumped and correct him.

“...It’s hard to express in just one word...” Minatogawa-senpai says.

“She’s answering!? We’re the ones with complex feelings here!” I shout.

She responds so naturally, it’s almost impressive.

“He must’ve realized by her voice, ryui. Shigure’s turning pale and backing

away, ryui...” Bimi observes.

Too late, but at least it’s a relief.

Minatogawa-senpai looks disappointed, biting her lip as her interview ends. It’s surreal.

Otone-chan stands there, not laughing, occasionally trying to slip away but held back by the crowd’s gaze.

Shigure redirects the mic to her on the podium, flashing a perfect smile as if nothing happened.

“He’s got some nerve...” I sigh.

The crowd seems to take it as a light joke, unfazed.

Only Minatogawa-senpai bites her handkerchief in the front row, looking heartbroken.

“Biting a handkerchief to show regret? First time I’ve seen that, ryui,” Bimi says.

She wanted that interview *that* badly!?

Maybe I’ll interview her myself later. She stirs some maternal instinct in me.

“So, let’s try that again—hero interview time!! Tell us your honest feelings about winning!!” Shigure says, squinting unnaturally at Otone-chan.

Does anyone squint that hard except a grandpa seeing his grandkid? I wanna grill him, but I hold back and watch.

Otone-chan, mic in her face, lets out a small yawn, “Ahh~,” then says,

“Hero interview...? Hehe, I only did a light warm-up, so I’ve got nothing to say~”

Her tone is impish, provocative.

It catches Shigure and the crowd off guard, silencing the packed coliseum.

My jaw drops, and Bimi quickly closes it.

With the whole school watching, she says this in front of the defeated Asuhi-kun.

Amid the silence, only the newspaper club's Rumina Rikyuu's camera shutter echoes loudly.

Her words will likely headline the extra edition, spreading to everyone.

"This vibe's unsalvageable, ryui..." Bimi says, grimacing.

Brushing off restraint, Otone-chan steps off the podium and strides out of the coliseum.

As murmurs of doubt rise, Shigure tries to recover, raising his voice to shift to an interview with the runner-up, Asuhi-kun.

Despite her provocative words, Asuhi-kun smiles and praises Otone-chan.

"What a good kid...? Is it the veggies? The veggies I hate? If I ate tons of them, would I grow up that nice...?" I marvel.

"No way veggies do that, ryui..." Bimi says.

Asuhi-kun's kindness soothes not just me but the crowd, softening the atmosphere.

He must be frustrated inside, but he's so mature...

Could I have praised Otone-chan like that in his position?

Asuhi-kun, calm and unlike his usual timid self, answers the interview.

"She's... Fujishiro-san is unaffiliated, but she'll likely join a club and face us in the inter-club battles! I'll fight her again and again... and I'll definitely come out on top!" he declares.

His passionate words earn thunderous applause.

He thanks his astronomy clubmates and even his opponents up to the final,

bowing deeply before leaving the podium.

“Hey, Bimi. Is it weird? After hearing Asuhi-kun, I’m suddenly... really frustrated. I didn’t want it to end there...” I confess.

I lost so quickly it didn’t sink in, and I missed the moment to feel down.

Watching from the stands, the reality of not being on that stage hits hard.

“Eruna...” Bimi hops onto my shoulder, comforting me.

The Rookie Battle, a once-in-a-lifetime chance at Mikagura Academy.

The joy of winning, the sting of losing—a bittersweet, unforgettable stage.

A sensation I’d never have felt in middle school.

But the thought of facing unknown seniors and countless new students, diving into that thrill daily...

“Whoa!! I’m getting pumped!!” I shout.

“Down one second, hyped the next—she’s a busy, suspicious kid, ryui...” Bimi says.

He’s right, but I’m not the only one.

The freshmen in the stands, witnessing Asuhi-kun and Otone-chan’s high-level clash and the interview, seem deflated yet clenching their fists with determination.

Who wouldn’t be excited, choosing Mikagura Academy over other schools?

This quirky academy attracts quirky kids. Probably.

Everyone must want to stand on that stage, watched by so many.

Looking back at the podium, Shigure’s somehow giving a passionate speech.

“The interview ended early, so he’s filling time, ryui,” Bimi explains.

“Shigure’s weirdly serious about stuff like that,” I note.

He once said his creed is to exceed expectations in any role.

“His service spirit’s too much! It’s like ordering ramen and getting free udon and soba! A non-stop main course attack straight to chubby-ville! He does that without meaning harm!” I say.

“That example’s iffy, but it’s making me full just hearing it, ryui...” Bimi replies.

I’d prefer just some gyoza as a bonus.

Ramen, udon, *and* soba? Too fancy.

Recalling Shigure’s antics from childhood, I shudder.

Seeing him sniff around on the podium, my bad feeling peaks.

“No glasses, so he’s... sniffing for something!? That’s not normal! Is he an animal!?” I exclaim.

“The girls who don’t know this side of him are beyond confused—they’re horrified, ryui,” Bimi says.

And the target he’s sniffing for is probably... I don’t want to be right, but I already know.

“Hey, Eruna-chan! There you are!!” Shigure calls.

“He actually sniffed me out!? From that far!?” I gasp.

In this vast coliseum, he found *me* among countless people.

If it were anyone else, in a different situation, it’d be romantic, but it’s my creepy cousin sniffing me out—anti-romantic.

I try to act like a stranger, holding my head.

“It’s no use, ryui. Everyone knows you’re related,” Bimi says.

I look around, and all eyes are on me.

“Uwaaahhh!?” I scream.

Despite being blind without glasses, Shigure runs straight for me.

I can’t hear the crowd’s murmurs, but I imagine:

“She smells so bad he found her by scent?”

“She’s unaffiliated—maybe her smell kept her out of clubs...”

My paranoia spirals. They’re mocking even the club I want to start!

“*Giggle*! Eruna’s ‘unaffiliated,’ but she should aim for ‘odorless tribe!’”

“I can’t stop picturing her dorm room stacked with air fresheners!!”

I’m a girl too, you know!?

I know they’re not really saying this, but my imagination won’t stop.

“*Sniff sniff*... No weird smells from Eruna, ryui! ...*Cough cough*! Maybe I’m catching a cold, ryui, *cough cough*!” Bimi says.

“Stop coughing at the worst time! It makes me sound smelly!” I snap.

The whole world feels like my enemy.

What is this!? Someone help! Help me!!

“Whoa! Did you call for me, Eruna-chan!?” Shigure says, skipping toward me with the interview mic.

“I didn’t call, didn’t want, can’t believe this!!” I glare.

“Nice snappy comeback, ryui,” Bimi notes.

I try to stomp his foot, but he dodges lightly.

Even without glasses, he’s sharp...!

The floating cameras focus on me, projecting my grumpy face on the big

screen.

It's like they're saying, "Here's the girl found by her scent! The source, the culprit, right here!" It's brutal.

All because of...

"And now, specially, the top-eight finisher who left an unforgettable mark and will one day have cute kids with me—my cousin, Eruna Ichi—*Oof*!?" Shigure starts.

I punch him square in the face before he finishes.

A hard one. Almost bloody.

If he were a small animal, he'd be in danger.

But he's not a cute critter—he's the bad weirdo, Shigure Ninomiya.

The crowd, seeing it on the screen, claps sparsely, while some girls protest.

Girls, wake up! Stop falling for Shigure's looks!

"Nice, Love Attack☆ Eruna-chan♪" Shigure says.

My full-force rejection didn't faze him. He's grinning like, "Hitting's love too!"

I'm done...

The pathetic struggle of Shigure probing my life and me dodging plays out on the screen.

To others, it looks like heartwarming cousin banter, their gazes warm.

"Nice story, ryui..." Bimi says.

"Wait! If this is heartwarming, every horror movie's a tearjerker! Like wiping tears watching a zombie attack! Right, Bimi!?" I protest.

It's suspenseful, and if this continues, it'll turn violent by my hand.

But I notice Otone-chan's negative remarks from earlier are completely overshadowed by Shigure's antics.

Maybe he planned this? To diffuse the criticism and bad vibe from her attitude?

It starts to make sense.

Shigure's interviewer role isn't just asking set questions.

It's about protecting the freshmen on this public stage, even if it means making a fool of himself.

His excessive cousinly affection made me cringe, but now I feel ashamed.

I'll apologize when we're alone.

For now, I'll play along with his antics.

"No glasses, so I can't see, Eruna-chan! I'm just getting the mic close for the interview, not trying to hug you...!" Shigure says.

"Yup, just an idiot, huh? My mistake!" I reply.

I overthought it, not wanting to see my childhood playmate cousin as a creep.

As he puckers his lips and creeps closer, I shove him hard.

The coliseum's heated air softens, filled with gentle laughter.

"Yup, they're great together, ryui!" Bimi says.

His words are drowned by the crowd's laughter, but I can't quite deny them.

*

Outside the coliseum, small groups gather, taking something and dispersing.

"The extra edition, ryui. Mikagura's newspaper club is famously fast, ryui,"

Bimi explains.

“Oh, the newspaper club... I was a victim—er, greatly helped by them,” I say, grimacing.

Rumina Rikyuu is no ordinary person...

Being featured is a big deal now, though!

With crowds rushing for extras, I hesitate.

“I’ll grab them, Eruna-san, wait here!” Asuhi-kun says, smiling, and dashes off before I can reply.

The runner-up, Asuhi Shusui, who was just in the final.

I want to chase after him, but recalling his defeated form stops me.

What could I say?

Oversleeping and missing his match, what words do I have?

I watch his retreating back, memories flooding in.

Stargazing together on the rooftop.

Practicing with me without complaint.

Cheering for me silently on my first-round day.

All his expressions are endlessly kind.

“No need for that heavy look. Asuhi-kun’s fine, ryui. He’s not just kind—he’s strong, ryui,” Bimi says.

I’d normally argue I know Asuhi-kun better, but this time I nod.

“Maybe I’m more shaken by his loss than I thought,” I admit.

As Asuhi-kun reaches the crowd, it parts like a wave.

Maybe they’re stunned seeing the extra’s subject or awed by the moment’s

star.

“Sorry... I don’t want to cut in line, but thank you for letting me through!” Asuhi-kun says, bowing rapidly.

His head-bobbing is so intense it’d stand out at a hard rock concert’s front row.

“That headbanging could crack concrete, ryui. A terrifyingly precise attack, ryui...” Bimi says.

We both swallow hard, sweating.

Asuhi-kun, despite his cute looks, is terrifying...!

Unaware of our whispers, he returns smiling, holding extras for us too.

“Is something wrong? Bimi-sensei, you’re sweating... Need a towel?” he asks.

His pure concern makes us feel guilty, stammering, “N-no, it’s nothing!”

Bimi’s eyes are swimming—no, drowning.

I decided to act normal, but maybe we went too far!

Asuhi-kun tilts his head, handing us the extras.

The curious stares around us aren’t my imagination—people want to see his reaction.

Not malicious, but I’d probably peek too.

Those stares feel cruelest.

“Haha, I’m in the article too. As expected,” Asuhi-kun says, smiling faintly but bravely.

“Top-ranked Asuhi Shusui, a first-magnitude star, dimmed to a sixth-magnitude. Barely shining...? That’s harsh!!” I cry.

The pre-tournament votes called him the brightest star.

But now, he's likened to the faintest visible star.

"It's fine. I let down a lot of people's expectations..." he says.

He gives me a soft, wobbly smile to comfort *me*.

I should be the one comforting him.

"Having a friend get mad for me makes me happy and strong!" he adds.

He looks up, hiding his shock from the harsh words.

I might've imagined it, but his eyes seem teary.

"Don't look, ryui," Bimi signals.

I wouldn't pry. I couldn't.

The staring students have vanished.

A breeze brushes my cheek.

"Even a dim star shines somewhere... Being mocked for that faintness hurts a little..." Asuhi-kun says.

He's not blaming the newspaper club but seems pained by the slight to his beloved stars.

That's so like him.

"You're shining bright, Asuhi-kun! To me, you're like a shooting star! Say a wish three times, and it'll come true!" I say, covering my eyes dramatically.

"Eruna, a shooting star sounds like he's burning out, ryui! Not now, ryui!" Bimi panics.

"No! I didn't mean it like that! I was on my second wish, but cancel it!" I backtrack.

I didn't think it through.

I almost blame Bimi for pointing it out, but Asuhi-kun wouldn't hold it against me.

I peek at him, worried he's mad.

"Haha, if I could grant your wishes, I would. What were they, Eruna-san?" he asks.

The tears I thought I saw are gone.

He's back to his fluffy, angelic self.

"Uh... I wished the points meant for champion Otone-chan would somehow come to me... Sorry..." I mumble.

"That's the worst, ryui..." Bimi says.

I can't lie well on the spot.

I fidget, a rare feeling outside of holding it in at the bathroom.

"It's beyond my power, but... a real shooting star might grant it! Let's look through a telescope and wish together!" Asuhi-kun says, smiling shyly.

*

The academy still buzzes with Rookie Battle excitement.

Students pass, holding extras, discussing matches and rising stars.

The stalls are cleaning up, the festival winding down.

Asuhi-kun leaves to meet his astronomy clubmates, and Bimi and I stroll, soaking in the afterglow.

I want to review today's match footage, but something else nags at me.

"Otone Fujishiro, unaffiliated like me... Is she scary?" I ask.

"I only saw her today, ryui. With that skill, you'd expect rumors, but nothing, ryui..." Bimi says.

Her provocative attitude, like she's above the Rookie Battle.

There's no benefit to acting that way. Why?

I want to ask her directly.

There must be a reason.

I can't sit still thinking about it.

Where could I find her? Unaffiliated, she's not in a clubroom.

"Hmm, guess I'll ask friends to find out which dorm she's in!" I say.

"She's unaffiliated like you, but she seems like a bad match, ryui. You okay?" Bimi asks.

"Leave it to me! I've got a great skill for pushing through even if people pull away!" I boast.

"That's a super annoying skill, ryui... Don't brag about it to anyone but me, ryui," Bimi says.

Really? I want to put it on my self-PR and blog!

Walking, I realize how many unknown places this academy holds.

The map shows a giant maze and a prison-like mark on a remote island—what crimes get you sent there?

Seeing a map and walking the grounds feel different.

"Wow, these flowerbeds are gorgeous! They must be carefully tended. It's moving!" I exclaim.

This area's beauty hits me.

Wandering aimlessly, I find vibrant flowerbeds.

You wouldn't get this from a map.

Studying and club battles are fun, but exploring Mikagura is too.

I quietly resolve to see more places.

“These flowerbeds are mostly managed by Minatogawa-kun, ryui. Besides the gardening club and its alumni, some students like him have their own plots. You could get one too, ryui!” Bimi says.

“Minatogawa-senpai, huh? This calming, floral space feels like her. If *I* tended a flowerbed, it’d be so full of Eruna’s charm it’d be a vast flower field! Minatogawa-senpai would be jealous!” I say.

“Your head’s the flower field, ryui...?” Bimi mutters.

His rude comment annoys me, so I grab handfuls of sticky weed seeds nearby and fling them at him.

As a kid, I’d stuff my pockets with these, saying, “I’ve got tons of weapons!”

Little me was aggressive—maybe more than now!

“Gah, stop, ryui! They’re sticking to my fluffy fur, ryui!” Bimi cries.

“With green seeds all over, you’re even weirder than usual! Kids would cry seeing you!” I tease.

“Cry, ryui!? Kids usually point and laugh, chase me, or surround me laughing! Now they’d cry, ryui!?” Bimi wails.

“Kids laugh at you all the time!? Chased and surrounded!? I almost feel bad for you!” I say.

Chasing Bimi as he flees the seeds, I hear a noise from a flowerbed behind a building.

In this secluded spot, right after the Rookie Battle, is someone tending flowers?

Curious, I peek toward the sound.

“Ugh... *sniff* ... *sob sob sob*...”

Otone Fujishiro is there, kneeling, crying softly.

I wanted to meet and talk to her, but not this suddenly.

Led by Minatogawa-senpai's flowers, was I drawn here? Probably overthinking.

Bimi, peeling off seeds, and I exchange glances, silently mouthing, "Coincidence, right...?"

Still...

"Her haughty, princess-like attitude during the interview feels like a lie..." I whisper.

"She's sitting like a girl, crying, ryui," Bimi says.

Yes, the girl-sit.

My favorite.

When a pretty girl does it, it's so coy, its charm a topic I could rant about forever!!

I'll have Himi-chan demonstrate the girl-sit's wonders later. For now, Otone-chan.

I feel like I'm intruding on a private moment and hide behind the building.

Seeds fly from Bimi's fur, creating a surreal scene.

"...I did it again. I didn't mean those things! But the devil in Fujishiro's head...!" Otone-chan sobs, clutching her head.

Her pronunciation of "devil" is oddly perfect! Is she a returnee with a chuunibyou streak? A treasure trove of moe traits! Calling herself by her surname is adorable too!

"Watching her while breathing heavily is grounds for the disciplinary committee, ryui..." Bimi warns.

Her voice is different from the interview.

It's hard to believe she's the same girl who stood boldly, ready to take on everyone.

"How do I cure this shyness...? When I'm nervous, my mind blanks, and harsh words just come out. I hate it..." she says, crying again with a "Wahh!"

I want to hug her. I *really* want to hug her!!

Her monologue reveals her shyness makes her act like a sharp-tongued sadist when nervous.

Not speaking is one thing, but turning into a bold S-type is unique.

I can't hold back anymore.

"Otone-chan! Let me hug you, pat you, maybe live together!?" I yell, bursting from the shadows, spinning with arms wide to tackle her.

"Eek! A monster!? The beast Mom warned me about, attacking cute girls!? I've grown too cute, and now it's here!? Mom, look! Fujishiro did it!" she cries, dodging nimbly while spouting nonsense.

"Not just unaffiliated, she's weird like Eruna, ryui..." Bimi says.

Otone-chan stands, hissing like an angry cat.

Her angry face is cute too, and I'm swooning.

"If I recall, you're the one who climbed halfway in the Rookie Battle and lost halfway, right? Your creepiness goes way beyond halfway, though, you okay~?" she taunts, her shy persona kicking in with the interview's sharp tone.

Her words could sting, but knowing it's her nerves, I just grin.

"Nice, nice, Otone-chan! I'm Eruna Ichinomiya, also unaffiliated! I'll stick to you until you're not shy anymore!" I say.

"I'm not shy! I don't even know that word!" she retorts.

“She’s using her returnee persona oddly, ryui...” Bimi notes.

Her prickly attitude aside, her guarded distance tugs at my heart.

But I won’t lose!

I’m great at closing gaps and forcing open locked hearts!

Not a method to brag about, but it’s my way of making friends.

Her growling pose is adorable, though she doesn’t mean it to be.

As we size each other up, she notices Bimi, gasping and straightening up.

“Bimi-sensei! Thank you for your hard work! Fujishiro Otone, model student! Super model student!” she says with a fake polite tone and sales smile.

“Model student... Fujishiro Otone is a super model student... Bimi-sensei will write that in her record...” Bimi mutters.

“Stop whispering like you’re brainwashing, ryui!?” Bimi snaps.

Startled by her change, Bimi looks to me for help.

But he seems a bit pleased being called sensei, which annoys me...

“Otone-chan, worrying about grades won’t make school fun! Relax, relax! Don’t think of him as a teacher!” I say, patting her shoulders.

She glares, brushing me off.

“Explaining how important grades are would take so long today would end, tomorrow would come, and we’d rendezvous with a bright future...!?” she says, confusing herself, eyes spinning.

“Grades don’t matter—Bimi’s got no authority there! You can be chill with him!” I say.

I look to Bimi, who nods reluctantly.

“Oh, really? A low-ranking teacher? A meh position? Why so ugly? Can I kick him?” Otone-chan says, her tone flipping.

“Her attitude changed fast, ryui! Where’s the model student!?” Bimi cries.

She speaks clearly only in this sharp mode, otherwise mumbling nervously. The contrast is wild...

“Black Otone-chan, White Otone-chan... I can’t choose, I love both!” I say.

“Don’t call me an Othello board! I’m always pure white!” she retorts, sticking out her tongue.

So coy... excessively natural and coy!

The coliseum image of her has flipped in this short time, in a good way.

Her clumsy honesty makes me want to protect her.

“Is Fujishiro-san’s English pronunciation good because she’s a returnee, ryui?” Bimi asks.

I was wondering too.

She went from adoring Bimi to looking at him like weeds. The demotion speed is unreal.

“No, I’ve never left Japan! Planes are scar—er, studying abroad is for delinquents!” she says.

“That’s a new take! First I’ve heard!” I say.

It sounds like an excuse for being scared of planes.

“Going abroad tanks your grades,” she adds.

“No way that’s true, ryui...” Bimi mutters, ignored.

“But a train abroad is safe for grades,” she says.

“What’s that rule!? Train magic is wild! Hope they invent a sea-crossing train!” I reply.

Saying absurd things, she's surprisingly talkative, not shy.

Is it just with us, or always? I don't know yet.

If it's just us, we could be great friends, right?

*

Otone-chan seems to accept our sudden visit, guiding us a short way from the flowerbed to...

"Wow, a place like this exists!" I exclaim.

It's a small building, its outer walls covered in flowers and vines, like a chic caf?.

Inside, white tables and chairs create a cozy vibe.

"Since enrolling at Mikagura, Fujishiro comes here alone to... not cry, but think about world peace," she says.

"World peace is... something! But this is your special spot, right? Our love nest, then!?" I say.

"She didn't say that, ryui..." Bimi corrects.

Looking up, I see the ceiling is woven with vines, letting in faint light that feels soothing.

Otone-chan pulls out a tea set from somewhere, pouring warm tea.

"It's a secret, okay? If this got out, it'd hurt my grades," she says, glancing warily at Bimi.

"I don't handle grades, ryui. You're safe, ryui," Bimi assures.

"Oh, really? Then there's a faucet for watering flowers—why not drink straight from it?" she says, snatching Bimi's tea and pointing coldly.

"Such humiliation, ryui...!" Bimi grumbles.

He obediently drinks from the faucet, lacking pride.

She hands me a cup of tea normally.

Is she warming up to me, since she's still shy with Bimi?

I don't know why, but it makes me happy.

She said she's always alone here—maybe she wants friends.

Surrounded by beautiful flowers, we share a calm moment.

The only sound is...

“*Gulp gulp*... Pwah! Ugh... Pff! Someone turn off the faucet, ryui! It never stops, ryui!” Bimi cries.

“Stop drinking and turn it off! Can you be a teacher and *that* dumb?” Otone-chan says, her harsh but concerned tone making Bimi blush as he shuts it off.

The calm was ruined by Bimi.

His bloated belly makes him look like a drunk salaryman, slumping with, “Can't drink more, ryui...”

“Drunk on water, Bimi...?” I ask.

“No... I'm drunk on this vibe, ryui,” he says.

His words bring back silence—a chilly one, not what I wanted.

But Otone-chan seems more relaxed, which is a relief.

If Bimi planned that, I'd say good job, but probably not.

Since I'm talking with her, I ask what's been on my mind.

“Why are you unaffiliated, Otone-chan? You're strong enough to win the Rookie Battle—did no club want you?” I ask.

I know beating around the bush isn't my style, so I go straight in.

“...” Silence.

She's not ignoring me—she's looking at me, gauging my intent with clear eyes.

Realizing my bluntness, I add, “Oh, I'm unaffiliated too! I tried joining the homecoming club, but it fell through—”

I share my story first, full of laughs (no tears).

By the time I finish, a lot of time has passed.

She laughs with me, urging, “What happened next?” Her expression softens.

She hesitates, maybe unsure how to respond.

Pouring another cup of tea, she speaks quietly.

“Why I'm unaffiliated...? Obviously, no club was worth joining,” she says breezily, but with a hint of loneliness.

“Worth joining...?” I echo.

She shakes her head.

“No, maybe *I* wasn't worth any club. Wherever I visited, I got nervous, and my shyness came out. Of course it didn't work out,” she mutters, shoulders slumping in self-mockery.

She tried to act tough but gave up.

Her opening up makes me smile.

“Winning the Rookie Battle was just luck. Being alone, unaffiliated, I wanted to be strong. Being unknown helped,” she says.

“Luck doesn't win championships, ryui. You should be prouder, ryui!” Bimi says.

I agree.

In practice, I couldn't touch Asuhi-kun. The gap was clear.

But wanting to be strong because she's alone feels so sad.

Thinking of my time with the drama club and After-School Six, it hurts more.

"Otone-chan, join the club I'm starting! Be a founding member!" I blurt out.

Bimi looks surprised but smiles warmly.

"A new... club?" she whispers, puzzled.

Realizing that's too vague, I clarify, "Basically, a club to gather cute girls for me to fawn over!"

"No way!!" she rejects instantly, tears in her eyes from even considering it.

"What? Even though it's for cute girls?" I ask.

"What does that even mean!?" she snaps.

She stands, quickly packing the tea set.

"I'm grateful you asked. Thank you! But Fujishiro has... her own things she wants to do! A club that sounds like it'd tank my grades is a no!" she says, her "thank you" in perfect English, then bolts.

It's a shame, but I won't chase her to force her.

"Things she wants to do, huh... Bimi, what do *I* really want to do?" I ask.

"Starting a club and figuring it out later works, ryui. Mikagura's club rules aren't strict, ryui," Bimi says.

I worry if anyone would join a club with no clear goal, especially one for cute girls only.

Dark clouds loom, a storm warning imminent.

“The interview and extra probably caused misunderstandings, but... she’s a good kid, right?” I ask.

Bimi stares at his water-bloated belly, then says glumly, “Once her shyness fades and she warms up, she’s a good kid, ryui...”





****Chapter Two: The "Let's Adore Eruna-chan"
Club (Tentative)****





The Rookie Battle ended, and regular classes resumed the next day.

The festival vibe vanished, replaced by the sensation of returning to normal life.

Looking out at the schoolyard, the stalls are gone without a trace, making it feel like I dreamed it all.

Everyone seems to have moved on from their results, slipping back into academy life without dragging it out.

Still, the newspaper club's Rookie Battle recap is the talk of freshmen and seniors alike.

I spot a senior from some club praising a freshman's efforts while reading it.

Seeing that makes me think clubs are pretty great.

"That's it! I'll go to the drama club today and have them shower me with praise!" I declare.

"What's that out of nowhere, ryui...?" Bimi asks, floating beside me with a confused look.

"I mean, I worked pretty hard, right? Plus, I'm the type who thrives on praise! Wouldn't mind if Nyamirin-senpai or Kumano-san-senpai hugged me while they're at it!" I say.

"Saying you want praise so boldly... that's so Eruna, ryui..." Bimi mutters.

"Ehehe~! Keep the compliments coming!" I grin.

"I wasn't complimenting you, ryui!" he snaps.

As we banter as usual, a familiar voice calls from afar.

"Ichinomiya-san, good morning!"

Hana-chan waves, jogging toward me.

She's the girl I faced in the Rookie Battle's first round.

Yet, she greets me as brightly as ever.

It makes me a little happy.

"Morning~! Oh, Hana-chan, you got the newspaper too?" I say.

“Yeah! Hehe... I was kinda thrilled to see myself in it, even just a bit,” she replies.

Her photo is tiny in the “Promising Club Members” section, with the caption: “Calligraphy club’s promising freshman. Lost in the first round, but great potential ☺.”

She must’ve worked hard to get recognized like that. It’s exciting.

Showing me the article with a shy smile, I can’t help but want to hug her!
Can I hug her!?

But... while I made it to the top eight, I barely got a mention in the paper.

Otone-chan’s unaffiliated championship win completely overshadowed me.

It’s understandable, but it stings a bit.

Plus, my goal was to gain attention from the Rookie Battle to recruit for my new club, so this result feels like a failure.

A shadow of doubt creeps over my member-gathering plans.

But! I can’t stay down!

It’ll work out somehow, right!?

People call me too optimistic, but quick mood switches are my strength.

No big troubles should pop up from here.

Time to think about recruiting members!

With that, I resolve anew.

*

After classes, I’m on the rooftop alone, pondering how to gather club members, when Bimi floats up with a gloomy face.

“What’s wrong, Bimi!? Your already iffy face looks even worse! Like, broadcast-ban level!” I exclaim.

“What’s that supposed to mean, ryui!? Is my troubled look *that* bad it needs a mosaic!?” he retorts.

Oh, so that’s his troubled face. Now I’m curious why.

At lunch, Bimi said, “I’ll check on club formation after school so we can start as soon as we get members, ryui! Leave it to me, ryui! I won’t let you down, ryui!”

“Is your broadcast-ban face because...” I start.

“Enough with the broadcast-ban stuff, ryui! It’s about your new club...” he says.

He explains that when he applied to start a club based on my idea, he got chewed out big time. They said, “Even at free-spirited Mikagura Academy, a club for gathering cute girls to adore is unacceptable. Keep the jokes to your appearance.”

But Bimi said Mikagura’s club rules weren’t strict!

“Is my appearance a joke, ryui...?” he mumbles.

A grown-up, a teacher, sulking after a long lecture.

“Ugh, no use moping about the obvious! Your iffiness is just how it is!” I say.

“Eruna! That’s not comforting, ryui! It’s digging deeper into my wounds, ryui!” he protests.

“So! We need a plan for starting the club... but how?” I ask.

Bimi, still looking hurt, gets serious and continues.

“We probably need to decide on a club concept first, ryui,” he says.

“A concept, huh...” I muse.

*

We're brainstorming a concept for the new club, but we're not getting anywhere, so we decide to borrow our friends' wisdom.

Secretly, I also want a little praise for my Rookie Battle results.

"Everyone's idol, Eruna-chan, is here~! Praise me, praise me~!" I announce.

I barge into the drama clubroom like it's my own room.

"Yo, Eruna-san, welcome back!" Usamaru greets me.

He seems fully recovered from the Rookie Battle, which is a relief.

But he totally ignores my "praise me" bit, which bugs me a little.

Is everyone starting to treat me too casually?

"Hey, Eruna-san," Tonkyun says.

"Let's take a break!" Usamaru adds.

"Yeah," Tonkyun agrees.

They were practicing together, just the two of them.

The Rookie Battle seems to have deepened their bond.

"Heh heh! I won't lose next time!" Usamaru declares.

"I won't lose to you either," Tonkyun retorts.

"You say that now, but when my Super Eccentric Shining ability awakens!" Usamaru boasts.

"No elementary schooler would use that name nowadays," Tonkyun deadpans.

"What!? It's totally cool!" Usamaru protests.

Their usual banter shows they've already shifted focus to the next battle. I can't dawdle either.

“So, what’s up today?” Tonkyun asks.

“Oh, right. I wanted to borrow your brains for something—” I explain.

I call over Nyamirin-senpai and Kumano-san-senpai, and we brainstorm with the drama club crew.

“So, my dream is a club where cute girls naturally gather, and we all have a blast together!” I say.

“How about a Youth Club? Yelling at the sunset every day!” Usamaru suggests, raising his hand.

“No one would join that,” Tonkyun shuts him down.

Their bond has made Tonkyun’s retorts merciless.

“N-no way! I-I’d join!” Usamaru stammers, teary-eyed.

I pile on, “I said cute girls only!”

“Ugh...! Th-then... even if I have to cross-dress... But Akama-senpai would probably pull it off better...” Usamaru mumbles, sulking alone.

“Hmm, how about a Costume Club? The drama club’s costumes need updating,” Nyamirin-senpai suggests sleepily.

“Sewing girls are cute, but I almost sewed my hand with a machine once, so no way!” I say.

“Plus, there’s a risk Eruna’s taste would make the girls’ costumes too revealing, ryui...” Bimi adds.

“Oh, that’s an idea! I like it! Costume Club it is!” I exclaim.

“That’s the peak of youth!” Usamaru gasps.

He was sulking a second ago but now blushes and collapses with a nosebleed.

“Kumano-san only shows skin to her future promised one!” Kumano-san-

senpai protests, blushing.

"I thought aiming for bear-like vibes meant clothes are a hindrance," Tonkyun teases.

"Wha!? Tonkyun, you jerk! Fine, I'll strip to be bear-like!" Kumano-san-senpai says, teary-eyed, tugging at her clothes.

"Ohh!" I lean forward.

"...Youth!" Usamaru, nosebleed stopped, collapses again.

"Okay, okay, let's stop there," Nyamirin-senpai says, calming Kumano-san-senpai and patting her head.

Their height difference buries Kumano-san's face in Nyamirin's chest, and I'm jealous.

After a while, we've run through tons of ideas.

Tonkyun's suggestion of a music-focused club sticks with me.

"Girls with instruments are insanely cute! Especially when they carry big ones that don't match their size!" I argue passionately.

A girl with a huge bass is just perfect.

"So, Eruna-san, do you play anything?" Usamaru asks.

"Nope," I reply.

"...What? Nothing at all!?" he exclaims.

"Yup," I nod, unfazed.

Usamaru looks incredulous, closing in.

"You're starting a club, probably as president, and you're a beginner!?" he says.

"It's fine! It'll work out! I learn fast when I'm interested! Like a sponge!" I boast.

Usamaru glances at Tonkyun, who laughs as if saying, “That’s Eruna for you.”

I’m a bit miffed at his expression but not upset.

“Alright! Let’s check out what similar clubs are doing! Bimi, let’s go!” I say.

“Wha...!? N-now!? Without an appointment, won’t they get mad!?” Kumano-san-senpai frets.

“It’s fine! It’ll work out!” I say breezily, leaving the drama clubroom.

*

I’m at the light music clubroom.

Last time I visited, I declared, “Vocalist here! Recruiting all other parts! Pro-level, cute girls only! Band romance encouraged!” and got kicked out, so I approach humbly.

It pays off—they let me try a guitar.

I sling an electric guitar over my shoulder for the first time. It’s heavier than I expected, making me nervous.

They teach me a two-finger chord and tell me to strum to the rhythm.

A senior warns, “Don’t go too hard,” and cranks up the amp.

A noisy hum comes from it. I’m already feeling like a rock star. Maybe instruments are my thing.

I signal “OK” with my eyes, and the drummer senior inhales lightly, counting off.

—1, 2, 1234!

JANG!

The speakers blare, and the drum’s vibrations shake my body.

Amazing! It feels great!

I strum wildly, lost in it.

But gradually, the band's rhythm starts faltering.

What's wrong? They can't keep up with my backing band!?

"Stop!!" a senior yells.

"...Huh?" I blink.

I was getting into it, but the light music club seniors all grimace.

A keyboard-playing girl approaches, saying apologetically, "Eruna-san... your rhythm... is a little... or maybe a lot... off...?"

Her tactful words sting. Bimi shakes his head, as if saying, "Give it up, ryui."

"Haha... sorry!!" I return the guitar and bolt.

"...Whoa!"

Outside the clubroom, I spot a familiar figure.

"W-wah...! F-Fujishiro wasn't... spying!" Otone-chan stammers.

"Oh? Otone-chan, you—" I start.

"B-bye!" she cuts me off, fleeing again.

I exchange looks with Bimi.

"What was she doing?" I wonder.

"Ryui?" Bimi responds.

She's such a quirky girl, but I really want to be friends.

Heading back to the drama club, I spot another familiar figure in the hallway.

“Hey, Akama-kun!” I call.

“Oh! I-Ichinomiya-chan...!” he jumps.

Maybe my sudden call startled him. He seems fidgety, unlike usual. Is his stomach hurting?

“Something wrong?” I ask.

“...Uh, well...” he hesitates.

After some adorable, hesitant moe-character antics, he speaks with resolve.

“I heard Asuhi’s been down since the Rookie Battle... Any way we can cheer him up?” he asks, blushing and unsure.

So cute! His usual tsundere vibe is great, but this shy side is adorable too! He says, “Ichinomiya-chan’s all about energy! Like, that’s all you’ve got!” which is rude, but I’m mature, so I let it slide. I’m a grown woman, after all!

But...

“Hmm, he did seem down right after,” I admit.

“Yeah,” Akama-kun nods.

“Ways to cheer him up... hmm...” I ponder.

I switch moods quickly, so I’ve never thought about what cheers me up when I’m down.

Still, thinking of ways to see Asuhi-kun’s smile, I reach a conclusion.

“Let’s hold a ‘Cheer-Up Party!’” I suggest.

“A ‘Cheer-Up Party?’” he echoes.

“Yeah, not all somber, but like a fun party!” I explain.

Instead of overthinking and worrying he’ll feel worse, a lively group vibe should be fun, and Asuhi-kun would enjoy it.

“Got it...!” Akama-kun says.

“Leave it to me! I’ll gather people!” I say.

“Wha!? Ichinomiya-chan!? Right now!?” he exclaims.

“No time like the present! Wait in your room, Akama-kun!” I call, running off.

He says something, but I’m already sprinting, eager to do something for Asuhi-kun.

*

At the gathering spot—Akama-kun’s room—the guest of honor, Asuhi-kun, is here, along with Himi-chan, Hana-chan, and Shigure.

I dragged Himi-chan and Hana-chan from the calligraphy clubroom and summoned Shigure via chat without explaining, just telling him to come.

True to his loyal dog nature, Shigure shows up without complaint, even bringing food.

“Getting called by Eruna-chan is such a joy! I was just making food to share, so I brought it!” he beams.

Akama-kun looks horrified at Shigure’s enthusiasm.

“Ugh, stop being embarrassing! But the food’s perfect. Akama-kun, can we use your kitchen?” I ask.

“Sure, but... are we really doing this here!?” he protests.

Yes, Akama-kun’s room is the party venue.

He grumbles about using another place, but his room’s size makes it the best choice.

“Thank you all so much!” Asuhi-kun says, bowing shyly but clearly happy.

Seeing his joy, Akama-kun’s complaints turn to a resigned sigh.

“This room’s kinda plain, though. Alright, Himi-chan, Hana-chan! While Shigure preps food, let’s decorate!” I suggest.

“Hey, don’t just do whatever!” Akama-kun objects.

“Sounds good! Hana-chan, let’s start over there!” Himi-chan says.

“Yes, Himi-senpai!” Hana-chan agrees.

“Hey!” Akama-kun tries again.

Himi-chan and Hana-chan are pumped.

Asuhi-kun joins in decorating, making Akama-kun unable to complain.

He’s wearing an apron he brought and skillfully crafts decorations with surprising dexterity.

“...Asuhi-san... and Ichinomiya-san, of course... might have way more feminine charm than me...” Hana-chan says, looking defeated.

Wait, did she just casually say I have no feminine charm!? Maybe, but still!

Himi-chan jumps in to reassure her.

“It’s okay~ Himi’s losing in feminine charm too~” she says, puffing out her chest.

Hana-chan glances at Himi-chan’s chest, then her own, and after a pause, cries, “Himi-senpai wouldn’t understand!” while decorating at lightning speed.

Didn’t this happen before!? It’s okay, Hana-chan! Your subtle charm is plenty lovely!

Asuhi-kun, seeing this, says, “Wow, amazing! I need to step up!” and

decorates even faster.

Soon, the prep is done.

“Now, for my beloved Eruna-chan’s top-eight finish and Asuhi-kun’s runner-up—congrats!” Shigure announces.

““““Congrats!!”””” everyone cheers.

Instead of a “Cheer-Up Party,” it’s a celebration of everyone’s efforts.

“Hana-chan, you did great too~ Good job, good job!” Himi-chan says, patting her head.

Hana-chan smiles shyly. I’m a bit jealous! I want head pats too!

“Eruna-chan, want me to pat your head...?” Shigure offers, blushing.

“...” I ignore him.

“What!? Not even a reaction!?” he whines, saying creepy stuff like, “Your cold look is cute too!”

I glance at Asuhi-kun, who’s naturally portioning out food.

His salad plates are perfectly balanced and beautifully arranged, his feminine charm undeniable.

“Ugh...! He’s way more feminine than all three of us! Asuhi-kun’s terrifying...!” I say.

“Himi doesn’t want bell peppers~” Himi-chan adds.

As we talk, Shigure, back to his senses, moves to Asuhi-kun.

“I’ll handle that, Asuhi-kun, you sit,” he says, leading him to a seat next to Akama-kun.

“But it feels wrong making a senior do it,” Asuhi-kun protests.

“Today’s a Rookie Battle party, and you rookies are the stars,” Shigure insists, forcing him to sit.

Asuhi-kun looks apologetic but soon starts chatting with Akama-kun.

“Thank you so much for today!” he says.

“...Yeah,” Akama-kun replies, blushing slightly and seeming nervous.

“Losing the final must sting, but you did great, right?” Akama-kun says, tsundere-style.

“Akama-kun, your ears are red~!” Himi-chan teases.

“So innocent~” I giggle.

Akama-kun snaps, “Shut up!” his face fully red.

Asuhi-kun smiles but turns serious, starting to confide.

“Thank you, Akama-senpai...” he begins.

“Hm? Yeah,” Akama-kun responds.

“Since middle school, I’ve had so many people’s expectations, which is wonderful, so I’ve tried my hardest,” Asuhi-kun says, almost to himself.

“But my skills haven’t improved at all... Like when I lost to Akama-senpai. There are stronger people out there, and I’m worried I’ll let everyone down...”

I almost interrupt, but Shigure puts a hand on my shoulder, shaking his head as if to say, “Let him finish.” I hold back.

“I just love stars and want to keep watching them, but it feels like I’m escaping reality... I’m scared I’ll start hating stars. And with everyone gathering for me, I feel so guilty...” Asuhi-kun continues.

I nearly shout, “That’s not true! We all love you!” but Akama-kun stops me.

Looking serious, he speaks to Asuhi-kun.

“I watched the final and all your matches. You’ve definitely improved

since our mock battle. Everyone values you because they see your hard work. So... don't worry too much... It's fine," Akama-kun says, stumbling from embarrassment.

Asuhi-kun's eyes widen, sparkling. "You watched all my matches!?" he says, grabbing Akama-kun's hand.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, he's like a playful puppy, almost hugging Akama-kun.

"Not that kind of thing!" Akama-kun protests, backing away and stumbling, looking like Asuhi-kun's about to pin him down.

"Whoa! Asuhi-kun's making moves!? Nice, nice! That's awesome!" I cheer.

"Akama-kun's even redder now~!" Himi-chan laughs.

"S-sorry! I got carried away!" Asuhi-kun apologizes.

"You two, don't tease them too much~" Shigure says.

"If Eruna-chan pinned *me* down... what would I do!?" I muse, lost in my own fantasy.

The party rolls on with lively chaos.

Soon, it's time to clean up.

"Look!" Shigure points out the first star in the darkening sky.

"That's Arcturus, near Spica. It's called the star of happiness," Asuhi-kun explains.

"Wow, Asuhi-kun knows his stuff!" I say.

"So romantic," Hana-chan adds.

"A happiness star sounds lovely~" Himi-chan says.

As we share thoughts on Asuhi-kun's star talk, Akama-kun nods and continues.

“You might not notice, Asuhi, but you’re always shining brightly like that. At least, that’s how I see it,” he says.

“...! Yes! Thank you!” Asuhi-kun replies.

This time, Akama-kun says it clearly, without shying away.

It’s genuinely heartwarming.

I want to be a senior who cares for juniors like this someday.

To do that, I need to start my club soon!

With the party over, I’m fired up again.

****Chapter Three: Unidentified Treasure****

In the classroom one day, boos and cheers erupted simultaneously.

“A Treasure Hunt? That sounds fun! Open the chest, and your heart’s desire is inside, it says! What do I do, Bimi!?” I exclaim.

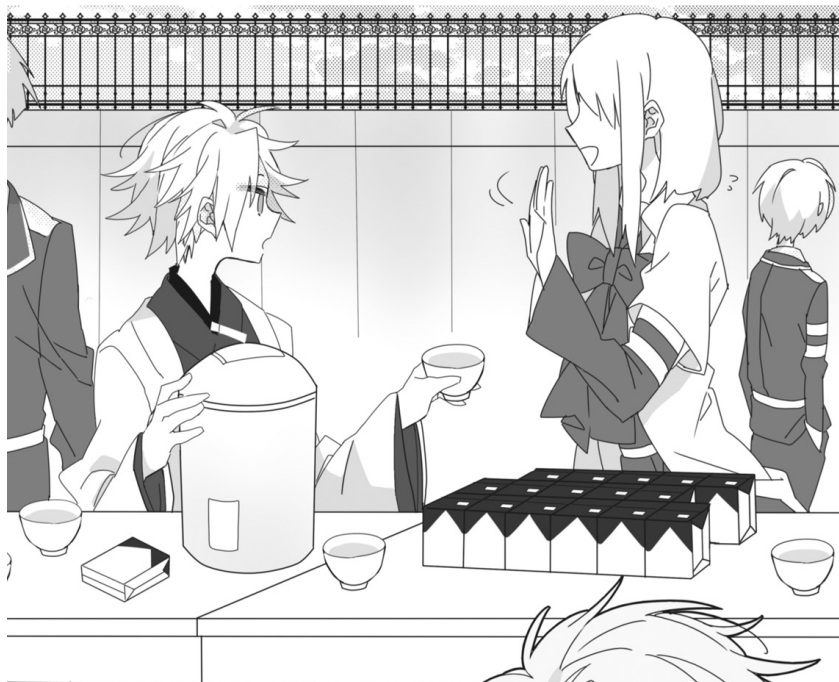
“Don’t strangle me while you’re freaking out, ryui...! Sure, treasure’s great, but worry about the chance I might die, ryui... ugh,” Bimi groans.

The ‘Mikagura Academy Treasure Hunt’ was announced out of nowhere during homeroom.

A map with hints to the treasure’s location was sent to everyone’s devices.

Of course, I was on the cheering side.









Teacher Kurumi explains it's an annual event for freshman-senior bonding and orienteering, kept a surprise to maintain excitement, so no first-year knew about it—not even the newspaper club covered it.

The booing came from kids who aren't athletic, pure culture club types.

“People like Ichinomiya-san, with great reflexes, are fine, but I can only sprint ten meters tops! It’s all walking to find treasure, practically a stroll!” one complains.

I’m not thrilled being called out, but maybe they see me as a symbol of energy!

Feeling positive, I’m hit with, “To avoid favoring extreme stamina gorillas, checkpoints have brain-teasing challenges. They’re designed so idiots can’t pass, so don’t lose to idiots!” Kurumi-sensei says, staring straight at me without blinking.

“She didn’t name me, but that’s about me, right!? Sure, I’m bad at riddles, but for a hype event like this, I’m aiming for first no matter what!” I declare.

I’m not the brainiest, but my grades aren’t bad.

Watching quiz shows, I give worse answers than the “dumb idol” types, and Mom once said, “Let’s find a job where you can rely on stamina, okay?” but I’m fine.

The booing kids seem convinced by Kurumi-sensei’s explanation, now studying their maps seriously.

I zoom in on mine, checking details. Preparation is key.

“Hmm, this is in a big forest on campus... right?” I ask.

“Yup, ryui. It’s not off-limits usually, but since there’s nothing there, hardly anyone goes, ryui,” Bimi says.

No one has an advantage, so we’re all on equal footing. I’m pumped.

“Only the first to reach the final destination gets the treasure. Only a hero with wisdom, courage, and friendship can claim it!” Kurumi-sensei recites monotonously, clearly reading a script reluctantly.

Noticing my stare, she stops and hands me the script silently.

“Me?” I ask.

She nods, and I’m shoved to the podium.

“Read from here,” she says.

This teacher just ditched her job!?

“Ahem! Only a hero with wisdom, courage, and friendship can claim the treasure! But, hoooooowever!?” I belt out.

“She’s way too into it, ryui...” Bimi mutters.

Hoping for praise, I glance at Kurumi-sensei.

“Yawn...” she’s outright yawning.

She twirls her hand, urging me to hurry up, pressuring me.

What kind of teacher!?

So gentle with the goddess, but this!?

This is discrimination, right!?

That Monpuchi thing I heard about!?

“It’s distinction, not discrimination, and what’s Monpuchi...? Ugh, maybe you meant Monster Parents, shortened to Monpe, ryui!? Either way, you’re using it wrong, ryui! Double fail, ryui!” Bimi corrects.

“Monpuchi’s cuter! Like, catnip-level vibes!” I retort.

While we bicker, Kurumi-sensei’s hand-twirling speeds up, and I hear a tongue click.

A teacher clicking at a student!?

“That won’t break me! Even if you don’t get the treasure, fast times to the goal earn points! Woo-hoo!!” I read.

“Don’t add your own reactions while reading, ryui,” Bimi says.

“No, it’s in the script! Look!” I show him.

“True... ‘Woo-hoo!’ is written, ryui... With a note, ‘Full of energy!’ No wonder Kurumi-sensei pawned it off on Eruna, ryui,” Bimi says.

Being a teacher here seems fun but tough.

“All freshmen must participate! Staff are volunteer seniors, so it’s a chance to bond with that cool senpai ☆ ...Hey, can I ditch this script-reading now? It’s getting rough...” I plead tearfully.

Kurumi-sensei avoids my gaze entirely.

My classmates ignore me, buzzing about the game, making me feel even worse.

The hellish time drags on, and afterward, only Hana-chan brings me a drink to console me.

“Ichinomiya-san, great fight! You got so into the script, acting like a hero fighting a demon king or a princess being rescued!” she says.

“Don’t... I don’t want to remember anything...” I mumble.

“That line shook me! What was it? ‘The real treasure... lies within you all ☆’?” she quotes.

“Please, kill me... I won’t resist, just make it quick...” I beg.

Hana-chan’s pure praise only deepens my emotional wounds.

I curse you, Kurumi-sensei...

If Usamaru were in my class, I’d have passed the script to him.

He’d have hammed it up, probably adding ad-libs for a youth-explosion story.

As I think this, a voice echoes from afar.

“The real treasure... heh, lies within you all, ryui! Woo!!” Usamaru shouts.

I look at Bimi, doubting my ears, but he nods, confirming it’s real.

“Usamaru... stuck with the same role in his class... and loving it, as expected...?” I say.

“Living a happy academy life, ryui...” Bimi replies.

Cheers from Usamaru’s class make me lament my lackluster performance and skill.

What’s this sense of defeat...?

*

Led by Kurumi-sensei, we arrive at the Treasure Hunt’s starting point.

Tons of freshmen are already gathered, waiting for the signal.

“Clear skies! Event approved! Absolute rest! Heck yeah, it’s gonna rock!!” Usamaru cheers.

“That last one’s wrong! You’re going for catchy words, but absolute rest means bedrest!” I retort.

Spotting me, Usamaru bounds over like a bunny.

“Usamaru’s all pumped, but earlier he whispered, ‘Can’t you sniff out the treasure with that nose, ryui?’” Tonkyun snitches expressionlessly.

“We agreed you wouldn’t tell, ryui! A freshman in the drama club got a turtle costume, and I can’t lose to them! No way it’ll be like the rabbit and turtle tale, ryui!” Usamaru protests.

“What’s that tale? The one where the rabbit’s girlfriend gets stolen by the turtle, so he trains on Demon Island for revenge?” I ask.

“No such tale exists, ryui! That’s way too scary! Kids would be traumatized hearing that bedtime story, ryui!” Usamaru exclaims.

But I swear Shigure read me a story like that when I was little.

“Shigure...?” Usamaru starts.

Instantly getting it, he tries to pry, but I back away.

Tonkyun stops Usamaru's pursuit, saying, "Go now. I'll lend you the real rabbit and turtle book later."

His kindness stings!

I wander the starting area, seeing freshmen passing time in groups—some with classmates, others with clubmates.

It's mostly an individual game, so plenty are studying their maps alone.

Those who shone in the Rookie Battle or got votes draw stares, either being watched or marked.

"That's Haruka Toishi from the broadcasting club, ryui. That line... is it for autographs?" Bimi says.

"It's like an idol event over there! And Usamaru, who was hyped earlier, is in line... is he okay...?" I ask.

I catch Usamaru begging, "Please write 'To Usamaru-kyun!' ryui!" when his turn comes.

Haruka-chan smiles, fulfilling his request, and kindly asks Tonkyun, "Your friend next to you... a pig? Does the pig want my autograph?"

"I'll take one. My name is..." Tonkyun starts, but a loud fanfare interrupts.

The broadcasting club's other freshmen cut off Haruka-chan's signing like pros.

"They run her autograph sessions like clockwork, ryui... Tonkyun, get one next time, ryui!" Usamaru says, patting Tonkyun's back, thinking he's bummed.

"I don't care about the autograph, but I couldn't say my name again..." Tonkyun sighs.

His mask hides his face, but he seems down.

Will I ever hear Tonkyun's real name?

I have a feeling it'll stay a mystery until graduation...

The fanfare shifts to epic BGM, signaling the start.

"Let's check the map again... It only shows rough checkpoint locations. No sense of distance," I say, pulling up my device.

Unlike usual, it doesn't show my current location, forcing me to rely on instinct.

"No choice but to walk, ryui," Bimi says.

He doesn't know the hunt's details, so he's no handicap and can tag along.

The music builds, raising the tension.

How's the start signaled? I wonder, when—

"Brave freshmen, welcome to the Treasure Hunt! Break through layers of challenges, and the first to reach the treasure gets...!" a voice booms amid smoke effects.

Naturally, it's my cousin, Shigure Ninomiya, manga research club rep.

"Shigure's MC again...? Does he handle every event!? Will he pop up at every big one until he graduates!?" I groan.

Spotting me, he winks with a *BAM!* sound effect.

Talk about mixing personal and professional! How does he keep this gig? Is Mikagura *that* short on talent?

Shouldn't the broadcasting club handle this?

I was briefly known as the unaffiliated freshman who beat Himi-chan in a match, but now I'm "Shigure's beloved cousin" around campus.

"Not happy, not happy at all..." I mutter.

Oblivious, Shigure overacts while explaining rules, hyping up manga research club freshmen.

They see him as a charisma; some resent me, his relative, shooting hostile glares.

“Even guys like him!? Shigure’s popular with guys too!?” I gasp.

“He topped the newspaper club’s Reliable Senpai Ranking by a landslide, ryui,” Bimi says.

“You mean the ‘Senpai We Want to Snap Back to Reality’ ranking, right...?” I retort.

Two manga research freshmen glare at me as I whisper with Bimi.

“Those two... look familiar?” I say.

Maybe from visiting the manga research club? It nags at me.

Shigure finishes the rules and shouts the start.

“Mikagura Academy Treasure Hunt! Is the treasure dreams, hope, or riches!? Find it, and it’s yours!” he declares, biting a rose and pointing to the forest.

“Huh? Can we start, ryui?” Usamaru asks.

“He’s frozen in that pose, so probably, ryui,” Tonkyun says.

“Everyone’s not moving, so he looks strained, ryui! That pose is shaking, ryui!” Usamaru adds.

“The rose’s thorns got him; his lip’s bleeding, ryui,” Tonkyun notes.

Usamaru and Tonkyun narrate Shigure’s pathetic state from the front.

Word spreads it’s time to start, and everyone strolls into the forest casually.

“Lame start, huh...? Let’s go!” I say.

“If we don’t move, he’s stuck in that pose, ryui. Starting quick is mercy, ryui,” Bimi says.

Manga research freshmen snap photos of Shigure from every angle, thrilled.

I don't get their world...

We're way behind, so I focus on finding checkpoints, when—

“Beep-boop, beep-boop! Nurse Himi's here! I heard someone's heart's hurt!” a familiar voice says.

I turn to see a nurse-costumed girl poking Shigure, who's slumped over.

“You're okay now! Pain, pain, go away! Better? Phew, nursing's tough~” she says.

No way... I dash to confirm—it's Himi-chan!

“Himi-chan!? Himi-chan in a nurse outfit, and the nurse outfit's Himi-chan...!? What!?” I stammer.

“Calm down, Eruna, ryui,” Bimi says.

How can I!? Her usual kimono is cute, but this nurse outfit screams refined charm.

“Hey, Eruna-chan! Hehe, does it suit me? Himi's a nurse~” she says.

“Thank you, God!” I exclaim.

“Why're you thanking God? Weird Eruna-chan! Oh, Henna-chan! That old nickname!” she giggles.

Her laugh makes her chest jiggle mesmerizingly.

Shigure's bleeding from his mouth, but I'm about to nosebleed from excitement.

“Bimi, make Himi-chan laugh more! Use your pathetic look to get laughs!” I urge.

“Too rude, ryui!?” Bimi protests.

Shigure's abandoned as we focus on Himi-chan.

The manga research freshmen have left, and I'm the only one lingering.

"Go, Eruna-chan! If you get hurt, Himi'll patch you up, so don't worry!" Himi-chan says, winking.

She's not just a cute girl—she's a weapon.

I'm losing it!

"Ow, ouch!! I think it's broken! I didn't notice, but my bone's breaking!" I fake.

"Your acting's sloppy and awful, ryui..." Bimi says.

Doesn't he get a girl's heart wanting Nurse Himi's care!?

I don't say it, fearing he'd say he doesn't want to know, but this chance might not come again.

I want to sleep in her soft chest... even if it's eternal sleep.

"Naughty kids faking illness get shots!" Himi-chan teases.

"Please, do it!!" I beg, practically groveling.

She doesn't take me seriously, pushing me to start.

But Himi-chan's nurse look is burned into my brain.

I feel like I can do anything today!

*

Stepping into the forest, the trees are taller than expected, dimming the daylight and messing with my sense of time.

Every direction is just forest, disorienting me.

The map's useless now.

“So many freshmen, but no one’s around,” I say.

“We started late, but this forest is just too big, ryui,” Bimi replies.

It’s hard to believe this is on campus; it feels like another world.

Some trees have marks left by other students.

“Tch, the marks are coded so only they understand—useless!” I grumble.

The cryptic symbols might be hints from seniors, but I’m so bad at this I can’t tell.

“It’s individual, but some went with friends, right? I should’ve tagged along,” I say.

“Groups have issues too, ryui. Look there,” Bimi points.

Two boys are fighting, one holding what looks like a checkpoint pass.

Only one person can pass per pass, it seems.

“They don’t team up to find another pass...” I murmur.

“It reveals true bonds or lack thereof, ryui,” Bimi says.

They’re panting, attacking relentlessly without abilities—either not allowed or not awakened.

It’s a stamina drain with no end in sight.

“They’re past backing down. Bimi, let’s go. We’ll find our own pass or another checkpoint,” I say.

As I turn to avoid them, two thuds sound.

Both boys lie collapsed, as if asleep.

“What happened, ryui!? In the seconds we looked away...” Bimi gasps.

He missed it too, stunned.

A mutual knockout? I approach to check, when a girl steps from behind a tree.

“Otone...chan?” I say.

Holding the pass they fought over, standing dazed, it’s definitely Otone Fujishiro.

She notices me from afar, greeting me with her eyes.

“They weren’t paying attention, so this happened. Fujishiro isn’t at fault,” she mumbles, clutching the pass.

I try to call out, but she cuts me off.

“Pay more attention. Observe your surroundings, okay?” she says sharply, then vanishes into the forest.

“Observe... surroundings...” I repeat.

I glance around casually.

Nothing special, just the same forest... wait!

“...Eruna, see it, ryui?” Bimi asks.

“Yeah, up that tree! A pass is stuck!” I say.

Checking no one’s watching, I jump and grab it. Otone-chan saw this from that distance...?

But she could’ve taken this instead of theirs.

Was she worried I was struggling? The thought warms me, but I owe her one.

“First, we protect this pass and find a checkpoint,” I say.

A fierce shout echoes from afar.

Only one gets the treasure.

I thought the forest had no enemies, but I was wrong.

“Everyone’s... an enemy...” I whisper.

The once-peaceful forest feels menacing.

Even rustling leaves make me suspect someone’s targeting me.

Brains won’t help now—time to rely on my strengths.

“Bimi, we’re running. Keep up!” I say.

“Ryui!!” he shouts.

I sprint through the forest at full speed, believing no one can catch me, trusting my endurance.

*

There’s more than one checkpoint.

Many drop out navigating the forest, keeping nurse-senpais like Himi-chan busy.

But every time I’m stuck, Otone-chan appears, gives near-answer hints, and vanishes.

“Coincidences don’t happen this often, right...?” I say.

“Her high specs are shocking, ryui. She clears brain and stamina checkpoints effortlessly, ryui,” Bimi says.

“That’s the Rookie Battle champ’s power. She’s looking out for me despite making enemies from her interview and the paper. It doesn’t faze her,” I say.

At some checkpoint, a senior distributes new maps with a ‘Rest Area’ marked.

“Probably less than ten percent made it this far. The real game starts now, so good luck!” they say kindly.

Learning the ‘real game’ is ahead nearly crushes me, but the rest area keeps me going.

Groups that stuck together are rare now; most are solo or paired.

“Everyone’s heading to the rest area? I barely saw anyone, but now I spot people nearby,” I say.

“They’re keeping distance, wary. Many are Rookie Battle standouts, ryui,” Bimi says.

Looking again, I spot Haruka Toishi from the broadcasting club, strolling sweat-free, like it’s a neighborhood walk.

Like Otone-chan, top fighters have all-around strength.

“Oh, it opened up, ryui,” Bimi says.

The map confirms this is the rest area, outside the forest, with campus buildings visible.

“People! So many people! We’re saved!” I cheer.

“Why’re you acting like a forest castaway, ryui...?” Bimi asks.

It’s a safe zone, with everyone relaxing, unlike the forest.

Seniors care for freshmen, but only a fraction of the starters made it here.

I look for friends but only get ignored by Otone-chan.

“They’re giving out drinks, ryui! Over there!” Bimi points.

Seniors at tables and tents hand out drinks.

“Wait... is that...?” I say.

“Super obvious, ryui...” Bimi agrees.

Among various drinks, two familiar senpais stand out.

Other drinks have lines, but their spots are deserted, making them

conspicuous.

“...Warm tea... plenty available... Oh, a tea stalk’s standing. I’ll take this one...” says Minatogawa-senpai, flower arrangement club rep, distributing tea at her own pace.

She timidly offers tea to passing freshmen, who reject it for cold drinks.

“The tea ceremony club’s giving out orange juice over there! That’s the right call! They prepped tons of teapots, expecting huge lines!” I say.

“She’s drinking the cooled tea herself, ryui... Or is it just Minatogawa-kun drinking most of it...?” Bimi wonders.

Imagining her excitedly prepping for a crowd makes me tear up.

Drink it, guys! Drink her tea!

Next to her, a senpai who looks like he’s intimidating freshmen is worse.

“Freshly squeezed milk from this morning. I picked the best, so first come, first served!” says Kyuutoryuu-senpai, art club rep, glaring while offering milk cartons.

His intensity scares everyone away, creating a cycle of irritation.

“Juice is for kids and girls! Men drink milk! Hey, you scrawny guy, want one!?” he barks.

A skinny boy screams, “Eek!” and flees like he’s being mugged.

Kyuutoryuu-senpai, dejected, mutters, “Why...? Oh, maybe calling it ‘milk’ instead of ‘cow’s milk’ would be popular...?”

“That’s not the issue, Enoyan-senpai...!” I say.

“When Kyuutoryuu-kun steps away, kids grab the milk, ryui. It’s not the milk—it’s him...” Bimi says.

Bimi, stop!

They’re too focused to notice me, so I grab a soda from another senior and

pretend I saw nothing.

More freshmen will arrive, so tea and milk demand should rise... maybe.

Losing confidence, I head to the rest area's exit.

"Since we got here, I noticed no one's leaving," I say.

"The mystery's at the exit, ryui. It's another checkpoint, ryui," Bimi says.

You'd expect people to skip rest and rush ahead, but no.

A monitor displays the next requirement:

"From here, pair up to hunt for treasure!"

Confused faces surround the monitor.

The rules change drastically now.

Only pre-paired teams pass through, explaining the few leavers.

Those stuck here without pairs grow anxious.

Among them, I spot her.

I nod, deciding instantly.

"Otone-chan, would you... pair with me?" I ask.

She stands alone, looking vulnerable.

Unable to approach anyone, and no one approaching her.

It's Otone Fujishiro, Rookie Battle champ.

Her title and infamous interview make her intimidating to pair with.

People watch from afar, but no one nears her.

"B-but Fujishiro... I'm not confident I can work well with anyone..." she says, voice trembling, on the verge of tears.

Her pleading, kitten-like eyes meet mine.

“You’re always surrounded by friends. You have tons of other pair options, right? So it doesn’t have to be Fujishiro...” she says.

Was she always watching me from somewhere?

Wanting to talk but too shy to try?

Always alone, watching?

“I made it this far because of you, Otone-chan. So, one more time, help me out?” I say, offering a handshake.

Her small, trembling frame hesitates.

“Pretty please?” I push.

Silence envelops us.

I feel her hesitation.

A soft gasp escapes her.

“If you insist that much, I guess I have no choice! I’ll help! Fujishiro can’t say no to requests!” she says, half-joyful, half-teary, gripping my hand tightly with both of hers.

Like she’ll never let go.

Inspired or not, other pairs form and pass the gate.

Familiar faces appear, unnoticed until now.

“Pairing with the Rookie Battle champ, ryui! Unexpected, but you two suit each other. Right, Tonkyun, ryui?” Usamaru says.

“We cleared all checkpoints as a pair. We won’t lose to a last-minute duo,” Tonkyun adds.

Usamaru and Tonkyun’s pair races ahead.

Then, an unthinkable pair emerges.

“Ichinomiya-san, you’re already here! Hehe, I went and picked someone up♪” Hana-chan says, tapping my shoulder.

Next to her is—

“I got... picked up. It’s safer with someone I’ve met before than a stranger!” Asuhi-kun says, blushing slightly.

They’ve met through me and talked before.

The pairing surprises me, but they look natural together.

“Grr! We won’t lose, right, Otone-chan!?” I say.

“I-I don’t care! Stop linking arms!” she protests.

Ignoring her, we pass the gate.

My steps feel lighter than when alone.

Otone-chan seems the same, soon pulling me along as we run.

Her face shows a new, vibrant expression—free of fear, completely natural.

*

From a floating camera, “Only ten pairs remain past the final gate! These twenty, who’ve already found the treasure of a partner! Which pair will reach the treasure first!?” Shigure’s hyped commentary blares.

“Shigure’s not just MC but doing play-by-play too... The camera’s got speakers,” I say.

“It’s been filming Eruna from every angle, ryui. Probably manually controlled, ryui...” Bimi says.

“That’s creepy!” Otone-chan exclaims, leaping and chopping the camera down in one hit.

“Eruna-chaaaan!!” Shigure’s dying wail comes from the broken speaker.

Bimi’s guess was spot-on.

Otone-chan and I lock eyes, bursting into laughter.

“Pretty carefree, huh? On a picnic?” a voice sneers from above.

Otone-chan shields me, on guard.

The voice isn’t overhead anymore—two freshmen lean against a tree.

“Uh, who are you...? Oh! Manga research club!” I say.

I’ve seen them at their clubroom with Shigure, but don’t know their names.

Otone-chan, uninterested, looks away, deeming them non-threatening.

“Don’t get cocky just ‘cause you’re Shigure-sama’s cousin!” the girl snaps.

“...Yup, yup,” the boy mumbles.

The brash girl rants, and the long-haired boy agrees quietly.

I recall they’re twins—and the ones glaring at me at the start!

I haven’t done anything to earn their hate...?

I stay silent, and they misread it, piling on.

“The manga research club’s like family! Our bond with Shigure-sama’s way stronger than your watery, flavorless, diluted Calpis blood tie!” the girl shouts.

“...Uh-huh,” the boy echoes.

I bet Shigure’d cry hearing this, but, “Uh... that doesn’t bother me,” I say.

Their eyes light up.

“See!? Darurururo!?” the girl yells.

“...See, see,” the boy adds.

They’re so excited it’s gibberish.

Otone-chan pulls up their info on her device, showing me:

Manga Research Club: Makoto Mi

Manga Research Club: Kotarou Mi

Ranked 6th and 8th in the Rookie Battle expectations.

That’s why they seemed familiar.

“No big deal. Just goldfish poop trailing Shigure Ninomiya,” Otone-chan snorts provocatively.

“Say that again, unaffiliated girl!” the girl roars.

“...Yup, yup,” the boy says.

“Still unaffiliated this late? No one needs you, can’t fit in anywhere! Might as well wear a ‘Lonely Loser’ name tag!” the girl taunts.

“...Bocchi-cchi,” the boy adds.

Otone-chan flinches, clearly hurt.

“Hey, you don’t get to talk like that! I’m unaffiliated too!” I snap.

I boil over instantly.

I can brush off jabs at me about Shigure, but dragging Otone-chan in and cutting her with sharp words is unforgivable.

“W-wait, Fujishiro’s fine. I’m not shocked!” she says.

“No waiting. They need to feel some pain!” I retort.

Ignoring her, I charge at the twins, weaving through trees to flank them.

“That way... no!” Otone-chan screams.

Too late—my footing slips.

The ground drops into a steep slope.

I’m falling.

Bracing myself, Otone-chan races over, grabbing my hand.

But it’s not enough.

We tumble down the slope together, into a deep valley.

My consciousness fades.

“Don’t start a fight and get yourself in trouble! We weren’t looking for a brawl!” the girl shouts.

“I’ll get the nurses!” the boy says.

The Mi twins panic and leave as we fall.

*

“You okay, ryui!? Wake up, both of you! Help’s coming, ryui!” Bimi shakes me.

I open my eyes at the slope’s bottom.

Soft soil cushioned us; I’m unhurt.

“I’m fine... but Otone-chan!” I gasp.

She shielded me, but hit something, her leg swollen.

“Don’t move her, ryui. You have to forfeit the hunt. Wait for the nurses, ryui!” Bimi says.

“No... because of me...!” I cry.

My hotheaded, reckless charge caused this!

With Otone-chan's skill, she could've won with anyone.

If I hadn't dragged her down!

Regret consumes me, when a gentle touch strokes my head.

"D-don't blame yourself. Fujishiro's not hurt at all..." she says.

"She's conscious, ryui! The Mi twins called the nurses, so hold on, ryui!" Bimi says.

She's clearly in pain, grimacing.

She's pretending for my sake, to ease my guilt.

"Even so, I want to make it up to you. Otherwise, I..." I sob.

She wipes my tears with her sleeve silently.

"Then, grant me one request. That'll make it even," she says.

"Request...? Anything!" I say.

"...S-spend a whole day with me. A full day!" she says.

"A date!? That's a date, right!? That's not a request—it's a reward for me!" I exclaim.

"Date... Y-yeah, that's fine! Let's date, Fujishiro and you!" she says.

"Pfft... Otone-chan, you're so nervous your speech is weird!" I laugh.

We laugh together.

A helicopter's sound approaches.

Looking up, Himi-chan's holding her nurse skirt, screaming, "No~! They'll see~!"

"...L-look at me. That's something you shouldn't see!" Otone-chan blushes, forcing my face toward her.

Is that... jealousy? I don't say it.

The Treasure Hunt was a bust, but my regret's gone.

Shigure's commentary echoes in my mind:

"These twenty, who've already found the treasure of a partner!"

Cheesy, but maybe true.

I grip Otone-chan's hand tightly, watching the helicopter's path together.

****Chapter Four: The Theory of Girls' Music****

三カクワ学園組曲4巻

発売おめでとうございます!

なははかおとねちゃんいっはいい曲いた気がします たのしかったです～
ありがとうございます!また次巻で…!

明菜







To plan our one-day date, we've naturally been spending more time together.

Today, after school, we're meeting at a nearby caf? space.

"How about the movie theater?" I suggest.

“Rejected,” Otone-chan says.

“Ehh! Then, an amusement park?”

“That’s rejected too!” she insists.

All my ideas—classic lovey-dovey couple stuff—get shot down by Otone-chan.

Such a shy girl!

Imagine going to an amusement park or movie, then dinner at a restaurant with a night view, and straight to my room... or sleeping bag...

Whoa!! Sounds amazing! So good!

Shouldn’t we stick to the classic date plan!?

“Anyway, those are all rejected! I promised a date, but... something lighter, ideally where we don’t even have to meet!” Otone-chan says.

“That’s not even a date anymore!” I protest.

Maybe to hide her embarrassment, she pouts, looking slightly grumpy.

I don’t mind and keep throwing out ideas rapid-fire.

Bimi, watching nearby, says, “Spending this much time together so happily already feels like a date, ryui.”

He smiles warmly, but I’m not settling for this!

It’s a rare chance, so I’m going all out to make it fun.

As we talk, the date planning shifts to random topics.

When I mention starting a club, Otone-chan starts to say something, hesitates, and stops, repeating this a few times.

I can’t help but blurt, “What’s up? Something to say? Something big? Like, moving in together!? N-no, that’s way too soon!”

“Tch, totally wrong! And moving in? Your place is a sleeping bag, right!” she retorts.

Her calling me “Eruna” without honorifics feels nice.

I can tell she’s opening up to me.

“A sleeping bag’s a palace when you sleep! I’m always open to you!” I say.

“Eruna, listen to her, ryui...” Bimi chides, as I nearly derail again.

I quiet down to hear Otone-chan out.

As I get ready to listen, she starts speaking slowly, carefully, like she’s weaving her words.

“Fujishiro... joined a club once...” she begins.

“Yeah... otherwise, you’d have been expelled by now, right?” I say.

“Yes... but honestly, I didn’t know what I wanted to do... There were so many applicants, I just joined on a whim,” she continues.

“...”

Looking down, she goes on.

“But I couldn’t get along with anyone... Worse, my shyness made me seem like a troublemaker... so I quit the club.”

She adds, “In the end, I ran away.”

I’m at a loss for words.

“After winning the Rookie Battle, some seniors from that club invited me back... but I’m scared of joining any club now,” she says.

“But...”

She can’t stay unaffiliated, or she’ll face expulsion eventually.

Being in the same boat, I understand that much.

Then, looking straight into my eyes, she says, “I don’t want to be expelled.”

“...I’ve finally made friends,” she murmurs.

“Huh? What’d you say?” I ask.

“N-nothing! It’s nothing!” she insists.

I didn’t catch it, but her words make me think.

If I can’t start a club, I’ll get expelled too...

That’s the one thing I absolutely don’t want.

“...Alright! Let’s go check out clubs!” I declare.

“Huh?” she says.

“I need to nail down my club’s concept, and you haven’t seen all the clubs yet! So let’s visit some!” I say.

“B-but...” she stammers.

“It’s fine! I’m with you! Right?” I encourage.

“...Y-yeah... okay,” she agrees.

Blushing but bold, she says, “Let’s make this our one-day date! A club-visiting date... that’s okay, right?”

“Yeah! Let’s go now!” I say.

I grab her hand, eager not to waste time, and start running.

“W-wait a sec...!” she protests.

*

We head to the flower arrangement club first.

Is Minatogawa-senpai here? I wonder, opening the clubroom door.

“Hey there! Mikagura’s beautiful flower, Eruna Ichinomiya, has arrived!” I announce.

“...Startled,” comes a voice.

Inside, Minatogawa-senpai is arranging flowers, seated formally.

As usual, she doesn’t look startled at all.

“Ta-da! We’re here to visit together! I couldn’t even sit properly, but maybe we’ve got a future flower arrangement star here!” I say, gesturing to Otone-chan.

“...You,” Minatogawa-senpai says, looking at Otone-chan.

Her slight reaction feels like meeting an acquaintance unexpectedly.

“Huh? Are you two friends?” I ask.

“...No, not exactly... but,” she replies.

Fixing her gaze on Otone-chan, she says, “...The flowers told me about you. You’ve grown stronger.”

Her cryptic words confuse me.

“Uh? What’s that mean?” I ask, a question mark floating above my head.

“...I tend the flowerbeds nearby,” she explains.

“Oh...” I say.

Otone-chan’s face turns bright red.

“Hmph! Those flowerbeds are lovely, but flower arrangement isn’t for me!” she says, her usual shyness kicking in.

“...You have something else you want to do, right? But if you ever want to join, I’d welcome you,” Minatogawa-senpai says.

“...Th-thanks for the welcome! I’ll come for tea another time. For now, bye!” Otone-chan says, bolting out.

“Otone-chan!? Sorry, Minatogawa-senpai! We’ll be back!” I call, chasing after her.

“...Ugh, the worst... She probably heard me crying and talking to myself there...” Otone-chan mumbles, crouching in the hallway near the clubroom.

At first, I worry she hated the flower arrangement club, but it’s not that. Not quite sure why, I add it to our list and we move on to other clubs.

Visiting clubs, I learn Otone-chan checked out several early on.

Her shyness made her seem standoffish, but seniors note she’s more approachable now, her expression softer than before.

“N-no way! This is just normal for Fujishiro!” she insists, blushing.

If my presence helps her feel even a bit more at ease, that makes me happy.

*

Next, we head to the light music club.

I flopped there before, but maybe Otone-chan has hidden musical talent.

With high hopes, I open the clubroom door.

“Hey! Mikagura’s global rock star★ Eruna Ichinomiya is here! *Gyuuin-gyuuin!*” I announce.

The club members turn to look.

Recognizing me, they whisper, some clearly saying, “Ugh, she’s back?”

I can hear you! And it hurts!

But I can’t help feeling like a rock star here—it’s unavoidable.

“...Hey, what’re you here for?” asks the senior who let me try the guitar last time.

“Thinking of joining for real...?” she adds.

I waggle my index finger, clicking my tongue.

“Tch-tch-tch. Not me today...” I say, pointing to Otone-chan, still peeking from the doorway.

“That’s...!” the room buzzes.

As expected, the Rookie Battle champ’s fame is school-wide.

“Senpai, can she borrow an electric guitar?” I ask.

“...Fine,” the senior agrees.

I pull Otone-chan to the amp, saying, “This way, this way!”

The senior hands her a guitar, just like with me.

Otone-chan keeps saying, “N-no, Fujishiro doesn’t care about guitars!” but when she strums a chord through the amp—

“Amazing, amazing! Eruna, it’s making sound!” she exclaims, her reaction adorably genuine.

But then, “Hmph! I’m not interested in light music! It’s not like I was too shy to try—it’s just not for me!” she declares, her shyness obvious.

Unlike with me, the seniors seem enthusiastic, even suggesting she sing with the band.

Huh? Why’s their attitude so different from mine?

This is social disparity...!

But if Otone-chan finds her perfect club here, that’d be great.

She hesitantly holds the mic, standing with the band.

Her cute appearance makes her look the part already.

So cool! Like a real band! I'm getting hyped!

Like last time, the drummer senior inhales lightly and counts off.

—1, 2, 1234!

The seniors' tight prelude ramps up the excitement.

Otone-chan, unfazed, closes her eyes, swaying to the rhythm.

As the intro ends, she takes a breath and sings—

“Stop! Stop, stop!” I interrupt.

Her singing is... shockingly bad.

I can't help but faceplant.

The seniors look betrayed, like, “Your friend too!?”

I didn't know!

Otone-chan, oblivious to the mood, protests, “What's that!?”

She even says, “Fujishiro's voice is totally rock!”

“Uh, yeah! It rocked my ears and your throat! Also, stop pronouncing only English words perfectly!” I tease.

The seniors' glares sting, so we flee the clubroom.

Otone-chan lingers reluctantly, saying, “Huh? Huh?”

But her reaction tells me something.

I'm sure she'll love the next club too.

“But... it’s gotta be this, right!” I say.

We head to the brass band clubroom.

This large club is led by Sagara-san, who crushed Usamaru and got crushed by Tonkyun in the Rookie Battle.

“The brass band has tons of cute girls and seems cool, but...!” I say, glaring with mock hostility.

Sagara-san pauses, then smiles gently, a stark contrast to her battle mode.

“Oh! You’re the drama club friend. Sorry about that time. I turn into someone else with an instrument in a match. I try to apologize to opponents afterward,” she says.

I recall Usamaru trembling, saying Sagara-san chased him.

It was to apologize...?

How pathetic, Usamaru.

He fled, saying, “I could tell, ryui, those weren’t normal eyes...!”

Talking to Sagara-san, she doesn’t seem bad at all.

“You’re both unaffiliated, right? Interested in instruments?” she asks.

We both say, “Yes,” and she urges us to try them, saying, “You won’t get the brass band’s charm without touching one!”

Otone-chan gets a trumpet, I get a horn.

I blow hard, but only a “Bufoo!” air leak comes out.

Still, both of us are thrilled by the feel of instruments.

Sagara-san grabs a sax and plays an impromptu phrase—mature, sexy, cool. I’m like, whoa!

We blow like kids, full force.

Then, Otone-chan's trumpet hits a clear "Pwaa~" note.

Sagara-san praises, "Getting a sound as a beginner is amazing!"

Otone-chan beams, a smile I've never seen.

I knew it.

She's super into music.

It aligns with the club I want to start.

"Hey, Otone-chan," I say.

"What, Eruna?" she replies.

"I really want to start a club with you!" I say.

"...But..." she hesitates.

"My club doesn't have a concept yet... but I want it to be music-related," I say.

"...!" her eyes widen.

"It'd match what you want, right?" I ask.

"Y-yeah..." she nods.

"So, let's do it together!?" I urge.

I flash my biggest, sincerest smile.

She's quiet for a moment, then, like before, slowly shares her feelings.

"Fujishiro's... shy... and doesn't get along with others easily..." she says, looking down, speaking deliberately.

"...But with Eruna, everyone's so bright, and..."

Her voice grows quieter, almost fading.

“...Can I be like that too?” she whispers.

I barely catch it, but I’m sure she’s found her answer.

“So, Otone-chan?” I prompt.

She looks up, smiling with clear, unwavering eyes—the most beautiful expression yet.

“No choice, then! I’ll join, I guess!” she says, a bit tsundere as always.

I giggle, “Ehe!” and she smiles back brightly.

“Sorry, looks like we can’t join the brass band. Making that declaration in their clubroom, though!” Sagara-san teases, but smiles warmly in congratulations.

Thus, our challenging club formation takes a big step forward.

We still need a concept and at least one more member.

But I’ve found my first “comrade.”

My heart races, thrilled, certain more amazing things are coming.

“—Here’s to us, Otone-chan!”

****Chapter Five: Izuha Seeing****

The Mikagura Academy Treasure Hunt afterparty, true to this festival-loving school, was held on a separate day just for extended revelry.

As night fell over the campus, the campfire's flames lit up the scene.

Freshmen who participated in the Treasure Hunt, along with sophomores and juniors, were dancing and singing, making it a huge celebration.

I greeted drama club members, classmates, and helpful seniors while searching for the star of the Treasure Hunt's success.

"Huh? I thought they'd be together as a pair, but only one was by the campfire, right?" I say.

"He's probably at *that* spot, ryui!" Bimi replies, looking up at a building.

Right, whenever he has time, he's always there.

At the place in Mikagura Academy where the stars feel closest, resting his wings.

Feeling the lively commotion behind me, I climb the stairs step by step.

Opening the door to the rooftop, I say, "Knew you'd be here, Asuhi-kun."

There stood Asuhi Imizu, who, paired with Hana-chan, successfully completed the Treasure Hunt.

The beautiful starry sky blended with the campfire's red glow, creating a mystical scene unique to tonight.

Turning from the telescope, Asuhi-kun's face wore a refreshed, radiant expression.

"Welcome, Eruna-san. I was wondering when you'd show up," he says.

"I was looking for you, Asuhi-kun! You're practically the star of the afterparty, so you gotta be with everyone! Hana-chan was swamped alone!" I tease, laughing.

He smiles sheepishly.

“The seeing is great tonight. The airflow’s calm, perfect for stargazing. I had something I wanted to do here,” he explains.

“Got it,” I say.

I didn’t catch the technical term, but seeing him so happy makes me happy too.

Standing beside him, we gaze at the stars in silence for a while.

“Hey, what was in the treasure chest? I asked Shigure, but he said it’s a secret for those who found it! Hana-chan told me to ask you,” I say, curiosity piqued.

I have no regrets about not getting it, but I can’t shake the urge to know.

“Haha, everyone’s asking, but I’m keeping it quiet. For you, Eruna-san, it’s okay,” he says.

Why’s it okay for me? I almost ask but hold back, waiting for his words.

“There were two chests—a big one and a small one. One was the winner, the other a dud. Hana-chan and I chose the small one,” he explains.

“Uh-huh, and then!?” I urge.

Hearing this secret, known only to the two who reached the chest, sends my heart racing.

“...Probably the dud. This was inside,” he says, pulling a small star-shaped glass piece from his pocket.

Just a plain glass trinket.

No gems, no intricate designs—just glass.

To an untrained eye, it doesn’t look valuable, and being called a dud makes sense.

“A dud... huh. But it’s a pretty star, right?” I say.

It’s not consolation, just my honest thought.

Bimi nods in agreement.

“Yes. I’m really happy. Getting first place made me feel a bit recognized. All my hard work wasn’t for nothing, like a gift from the gods. I’m thrilled!” Asuhi-kun says, clutching the star-shaped glass to his chest, eyes shining.

“So, I came here to report to my favorite stars...” he adds.

“Uh-huh, yeah!” I nod.

Maybe it was the dud chest.

To most, it might seem that way.

But to Asuhi-kun, it’s no mere dud.

I don’t know what was in the other chest.

But I think he’s better off with this one.

“Have I told you why I love stars, Eruna-san?” he asks.

“Nope, don’t think so,” I reply.

Taking a breath, he speaks carefully, savoring each word.

“When I was little, I was always bullied. For not being ‘manly,’ or some trivial reason. Then I heard a story: wish on a shooting star three times, and it’ll come true,” he says.

I can’t respond.

Even knowing it’s resolved, it’s not something I can easily process.

Seeing me falter, he continues.

“One day, I wished on a shooting star: to be strong, to not lose myself. I

wished three times. I don't know if it worked—maybe just self-suggestion. But... that's when I first stood up to my bullies. After that, the bullying stopped," he says.

"And that's why you love stars...?" I ask.

"Exactly. Haha, maybe I've been leaning on stars ever since. Whenever I had troubles, I'd look at them and talk it out. But today, I came to share good news. To say thank you..." he says, adding, "I feel so proud."

Somehow, I feel proud too.

I want to shout to the stars, "Look how much Asuhi-kun's grown!"

I'm about to yell for real when—

"Asuhi, you're here? The afterparty can't end without the star," Akama-kun says.

"Right! It's unfair leaving it all to me. Let's dance with everyone! Show off that star!" Hana-chan says, holding the glass trinket.

Astronomy club members and other students come to fetch Asuhi-kun.

"Come on, Asuhi-kun! The stars want to see you surrounded by friends, dancing happily!" I say, grabbing his hand and racing back to the crowd.

"Yes, you're right!" he agrees.

*

After the long afterparty, exhausted from dancing, I'm curled up in my sleeping bag.

"Really, Fujishiro's sleeping in this too? I pride myself on good sleeping habits, but if I roll, I'll hit the stairs, tumble down, and get seriously hurt! It'll be a scandal!" Otone-chan frets.

What's different tonight is Otone-chan, wrapped in a sleeping bag beside me, equally anxious.

"Sharing food and sleep makes true friends! I'm not letting you sleep tonight☆!" I tease.

“F-friends...! No way! I’m not swooning! Fujishiro’s not some easy girl swayed by words!” she protests.

Her sleeping bag bounces, betraying her excitement.

How cute is she...?

For the first time, I have a comrade joining my club. The mid-term battle’s coming, and the club formation deadline’s tight.

But I feel everything’s turning around from here.

Peeking out of my sleeping bag, I gaze at the stars through the window.

I make a wish on a fateful shooting star.

—What I wished for? I won’t tell until it comes true!

****Afterword****

Last Note. here. Friends often say they look forward to my afterwords! I’m human—praise never feels bad.

Recently, in my monotonous daily life, something fun happened that I *had* to share in this afterword. I’m confident it’ll be a hit!

I want to spill it, but hold on—calm down. I’ve only got one page for this afterword. I need to be concise, no fluff. But this is my battleground, the afterword page—I can’t flop! I need time to mentally prepare. Some might suspect I’m stalling because there’s no story, but that’s outrageous! I can’t keep this up, or they’ll think it’s true. Let’s get to it!

The other day, (Editor’s Note: An absolutely hilarious episode followed, but due to space constraints, we had to cut it with tears.)

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